

James W. Swigert

Colonel Rothmann

ARCHIVAL COPY

Course Two - National War College

November 2, 1994

### Understanding Yugoslavia's Killing Fields

Since Yugoslavia disintegrated in violence three years ago, observers have struggled to understand why the Yugoslav conflict has been so brutal and in particular involved such extensive violence against civilian populations. For many commentators, it was sufficient to refer to historic ethnic rivalries in the Balkans, attributing Serbian "ethnic cleansing" campaigns to "age-old" enmities that resurfaced with communism's collapse.

Evoking history, however, does not explain why this war has surpassed previous Yugoslav internal conflicts in terms of casualties among non-combatants, numbers of displaced people and refugees, and wanton destruction of cultural monuments. In addition, focusing on the past tends to discount the responsibility for the conduct of the war of current political leaders.

Based on Claus Von Clausewitz's seminal study of war, it seems more likely that the main reasons for this particular conflict's brutality can be found by examining the decisions made on political ends and military means by leaders of the former Yugoslavia before and during the conflagration. In this regard, the most

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>02 NOV 1994</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>02-11-1994 to 02-11-1994</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Understanding Yugoslavia's Killing Fields</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>see report</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>12</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

critical role belongs to the Serbian leadership, given Belgrade's inheritance of the bulk of the Yugoslav National Army and its resulting commanding military position vis-a-vis the other former Yugoslav republics.

In order to pin down the principal reasons for the violence directed against non-combatants in the former Yugoslavia, this essay analyzes the three phases of war in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia from the perspective of Serbian strategy, drawing on Clausewitz's insights on the nature of war and its relationship to policy and strategy. The essay concludes that the key factor behind the violence directed against non-combatants is found in Serbian President Milosevic's decision to pursue extreme ends with limited military means. This strategic miscalculation caused Milosevic gradually to lose control over Serbian policy and drove the Yugoslav conflict toward Clausewitz's vision of absolute war.

#### Slovenia: Serbia Adjusts Ends to Means

Fearing Milosevic's drive to assert Serbian hegemony over Yugoslavia, Slovenia took the initiative to force Yugoslavia's dissolution. Not surprisingly, the Yugoslav wars of disintegration erupted first in Slovenia.

In Slovenia Belgrade's opponents took the military initiative. Indeed, the Slovenes fired the first shot, at least in a figurative sense, using force to take over federal customs posts after declaring independence (along with Croatia) on June 25, 1991. When the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) responded by attempting to seize the border posts, the Slovenes responded with a well-thought-out defense plan, and

rapidly mobilized territorial defense forces to take the offensive against outnumbered JNA forces stationed in Slovenia.

The Slovene forces encircled JNA installations, seizing equipment and blocking movements. These moves forced the JNA to turn to its superior firepower to attempt to coerce the Slovenes. As the number of dead in the first week of fighting neared fifty — many of these JNA conscripts — television images of JNA planes buzzing Ljubljana brought international condemnations of Belgrade. EC ministers began shuttle diplomacy in an effort to staunch the violence.

The result on July 7 was a cease-fire agreement ("the Brioni Agreement") which, unlike the scores of cease-fire agreements negotiated subsequently for Croatia and Bosnia, actually stuck. One reason the agreement held was its flexible terms, which kept alive the possibility of a political compromise. Both sides had agreed to suspend Slovenia's declaration of independence for three months. However, the more important reason the agreement held can be found in Clausewitz's general prescription for winning wars: "If the enemy is to be coerced, you must put him in a situation that is even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on him to make" (1). The Slovenes did just that.

Milosevic had hoped to hold Slovenia in a Serb-dominated Yugoslavia but had no compelling political motivation to do so, since Slovenia did not have a Serbian minority. The surprisingly strong Slovene military defense, which had political echoes in Serbia, forced Milosevic to reconsider this objective. (Serbian mothers marched on the Serbian parliament in Belgrade, demanding the JNA withdraw from

Slovenia in order to free their sons.) Validating Clausewitz's eminently rational advice that "once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, peace must follow" (2), Milosevic arranged to withdraw the JNA from Slovenia and acquiesced in its independence.

#### Croatia: Extreme Serbian Ends Require New Means.

This separate peace between Slovenia and Serbia in effect cleared the decks for a Serb-Croat showdown. After the Brioni agreement, violence rapidly escalated between Croatian police and Milosevic-backed militant Serb rebels, who had declared their own autonomous "Krajina Serb Republic" in defiance of Croatian independence. As the clashes between Krajina Serbs and Croats multiplied, the JNA inserted itself between the two sides, ostensibly in a peace-keeping function, but usually taking the Serbian side.

By fall 1991, any pretense of JNA neutrality was dropped. Working with Krajina Serb paramilitaries, the JNA fought to expel Croatian forces from so-called "historic Serb lands." These were defined so as to encompass many areas with a majority Croat population, which Serbs justified on the basis of WWII massacres of Serbs by Croatia's quisling fascist government.

Croatia, taking cue from Slovenian tactics, blockaded JNA facilities throughout the republic. In response, the JNA bombarded Croatian cities, regardless of historic significance or ethnically mixed populations, in an effort to compel the Croatian government to free JNA troops. As public opinion was deliberately

aroused by authorities in Belgrade and Zagreb to help mobilize additional forces, passions rose on both sides. In order to "liberate" the ethnically mixed Danube river city of Vukovar — previously a thriving commercial port — JNA artillery reduced the city to rubble prior to its occupation in October 1991. Three years later, the Serb-held city still stands in ruins, a monument to Clausewitz's warning that "war is an act of force and there is no logical limit to the application of that force" (3).

While equipped with superior firepower, in general, the JNA proved to be an ineffective fighting force, poorly motivated and even more poorly led. Formed under Tito to defend all Yugoslavia, the JNA stumbled over the contradictions inherent to participation by a multi-ethnic army in an ethnically-based civil war. Although its officer corps was dominated by Serbs, other nationalities held positions of command. Serbian troops sometimes refused to take orders from officers of other nationalities; on occasion, ethnic Croat officers defected to Croatia, carrying equipment (even MIGS) with them. Conscripts of all nationalities deserted and Serbian reservists massively dodged call-ups, leaving the JNA manpower and capability short.

As a result, the JNA came to rely heavily on Serb paramilitary and volunteer forces to prosecute the war. The paramilitaries and reservists were ill-trained, and often engaged in looting as well as indiscriminate violence. However, the combination of JNA firepower and Serb paramilitary manpower proved effective although brutal and inefficient. By late 1991, approximately a third of Croatia was under JNA and Krajina Serb occupation. With the boundaries thus drawn for a

Greater Serbia, Milosevic agreed to a UN-mediated cease-fire in place and political negotiations, eventually imposing the agreement over stiff Krajina Serb objections. When UN peace-keepers finally arrived in spring 1992, the estimated death toll stood at 10,000; refugees and displaced persons numbered over half a million.

The violence these figures reflected derived directly from the policy objectives of the two sides. As Clausewitz wrote "...war is part of policy, policy will determine its character" (4). From Belgrade's perspective, no break to war was possible until a homeland for Croatia's Serbs, contiguous to other Serb-populated areas, was carved out from Croatia. Given Zagreb's resistance and the mixed population in the area claimed by Serbs, this goal necessarily implied a large degree of coercion to force non-Serbs either to accept Serbian hegemony or flee their homes. As violence spread, villages polarized along ethnic lines. Serb militants pressed their co-nationals to choose sides and considered all ethnic Croats, even former friends, to be potential enemies. Similar attitudes developed among Croats.

The indiscriminate violence employed against non-combatants, however, derived not just from Milosevic's aims, but also from the very limited means the Yugoslav army provided him to reach those goals, which forced the development of different military means and different military ways. The Serb paramilitary forces Milosevic and the JNA relied on to do the brunt of the direct fighting in Croatia defined Serbian objectives in avowedly racist terms, thus justifying the most extreme methods and laying the groundwork for the much larger scale ethnic

cleansing to follow in Bosnia.

### Bosnia-Herzegovina: Means Overtake Ends

Unlike Croatia, where Serbs were concentrated in a few specific regions outside the major cities, pre-war Bosnia-Herzegovina was a leopard skin-like jumble of three major ethnic groups--Serbs, Croats and Muslim Slavs--a Yugoslavia in miniature. Muslims and Croats together made up a majority of the population, and were strongly opposed to remaining in a Serb-dominated little Yugoslavia, particularly after the Croatian war erupted. In 1991 Milosevic made a feeble effort to persuade the Bosnian Muslims politically to remain in Yugoslavia. At the same time, he and his Bosnian Serb proxies planned for war. In preparation, JNA forces withdrawn from Croatia as UN forces arrived were shifted to Bosnia.

Serb-Croat fighting on the Croatian border spilled across into Bosnia in March 1992, and in April the war began in earnest. Lacking an army, the newly recognized Bosnian government feverishly tried to organize a military force, and turned for help to the Croatian army. Over the next few months Bosnian Serb paramilitaries, backed by the JNA, repeated the ethnic cleansing tactics used in Croatia to terrorize entire villages to abandon their homes. But the scale used in Bosnia was much greater. By fall 1993, Serbian forces had occupied over 70% of the republic's territory, killing or displacing well over a million people.

Fearing sanctions or more vigorous international reaction, in May 1992 Milosevic attempted to insulate Serbia from criticism by withdrawing the JNA from



Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. The withdrawal proved to be more in form than substance: the JNA handed its heavy weapons over to Bosnian Serb and Krajina Serb militia; many officers and soldiers simply changed uniforms. As in Croatia, in Bosnia Serb paramilitary forces were less disciplined and more prone to use violence against non-combatants. They proved to be particularly enamored of JNA siege and bombardment tactics and employed these vigorously against the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo until dissuaded by the threat of NATO air attacks in spring 1994.

Milosevic's decision to rely on the indirect means of "independent" Bosnian Serb forces -- a piece of deception worthy of the Chinese writer on war Sun Tzu -- did not, however, forestall imposition of sanctions against Serbia. While perhaps tactically useful in helping to defuse calls for outside military intervention, strategically the decision proved to be a disaster for Serbia. In severing the military chain of command from Belgrade to Serb forces outside Serbia proper, Milosevic actually decreased Belgrade's influence over those responsible for the abuses driving international efforts to sanction and isolate Serbia. Twice he tried and failed to persuade his Bosnian clients to accept international peace plans: first in May 1993, then later in July 1994.

The ever spiralling violence in Bosnia offers even stronger support than the Croatian conflict to Clausewitz's view that prolonged war tends toward extremes. The ways of warfare adopted by the Bosnian Serbs (and mimicked somewhat by the other sides, but to a much lesser degree) reflected a willingness to engage into

total warfare against enemies defined purely in ethnic terms: routine attacks on non-combatants were systematized to encompass detention/deportation centers evocative of Nazi death camps. The conflict between Serbs and a Muslim/Croat alliance committed to multi-ethnic life degenerated over the course of 1992 into a three-sided civil war, reverting in 1994 to a two way conflict only after the U.S. pressured Zagreb to reverse its support for separatist Bosnian Croats.

### Milosevic's Dilemma: Taming His Beasts

To sum up this necessarily abbreviated review, three main factors explain the massive violence directed against non-combatants during the Yugoslav war. First, the extreme policy object sought by Serbia stymied any compromise with opponents and drove the conduct of the war toward Clausewitzian extremes. Milosevic's refusal to consider any solution which left Serbs in a Croatian or Bosnian state encouraged Serbs there to use maximum violence to seize maximum territory, since the break with former neighbors was considered final.

Second, the insufficient means available in 1991 to pursue such extreme ends forced Milosevic to develop new means and ways, intrinsically more violent. The Serbian president turned to paramilitaries, and these poorly disciplined Serb militia in turn employed indiscriminate methods of coercion: bombardments and sieges to seize territory and demoralize the enemy; ethnic cleansing to create new demographic facts and establish long term control over territory. These tactics minimized Serb losses but maximized (non-Serb) civilian casualties.

Finally, Milosevic's decision to rely on an indirect approach -- acting through Bosnian Serb and Krajina Serb proxies -- broke the chain of command from policy set in Belgrade to military actions by Serbian commanders in the field. Imposing discipline and/or restraint became much more difficult for Milosevic; in some cases, impossible.

Control over Serbian strategy, not just battlefield tactics, has slipped from Milosevic's grasp, as the passions of war, even more than before, drive Serbian military decisions. As a result, although Serbian forces have achieved Milosevic's war aims militarily, ironically Milosevic is unable to consolidate these gains through a peace agreement. His Bosnian Serb proxies have so far rejected proposed agreements acceptable to Milosevic (and accepted by the other parties) as requiring too many concessions. With the top Bosnian Serb military commander playing the role of chief hardliner, and arguing that no territory where Serbian soldiers have died can be "given away," policy has ceased to control Serbian military operations in Bosnia. With Clausewitz's trinity so far out of balance, prospects for ending the Yugoslav war are slim indeed.

## NOTES

- 1 Carl Von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976) 88.
- 2 Clausewitz, 92.
- 3 Clausewitz, 77.
- 4 Clausewitz, 606.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carl Von Clausewitz. On War . Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976.

Economist Intelligence Unit. Yugoslavia Country Reports ns 1-4 (1991, 1992, 1993)

State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights (Washington,DC)  
1992, 1993, 1994